

John 17: 20-26 On being one...

Today is the 7th Sunday of Easter on the church calendar...we celebrated the resurrection on Easter Sunday and since have thought about the resurrection's meaning through the witness left by the disciples as Jesus continued to appear to them in bodily form for forty days. Last Sunday we talked some about how Jesus explained again to the disciples what was to happen—his bodily form was going to leave them as it was time for his return to the Father and to reign there with him. The church's official marking of the ascension on the fortieth day occurs during the middle of the week—between Sundays--this past Thursday to be exact. This Sunday is another example of an "in between time" found in the scriptural account of God's interactions with us—we are observing that marking of time between Christ's ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost which we observe next Sunday. Yet our two Scripture readings are not from this time of waiting in the disciples' lives. Our first reading comes from the Book of Acts which itself opens with that powerful and transformative coming of the Spirit. In fact, this reading and several of our recent readings have come from later chapters in Acts—some time has passed after the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Like we see in this reading, great changes are being done by the Spirit through the changes within those disciples. The man who held the coats of those who stoned Stephen is now on the road proclaiming the gospel. On the other hand for the last several Sundays, the gospel readings from John have come from the pre-crucifixion discourse on his last night with the disciples. They have focused on the time when Jesus taught them and tried to prepare the disciples for the events to come. The contrasting location of these two points of time—the time between something seen or known and something which is promised is very much like our time. The followers of Christ since then have lived in the time between the Jesus' earthy dwelling among us and the time of promise when he will come again for over two thousand years now. We are the ones for whom Jesus is offering that prayer narrated in this morning's passage...the ones who believe in Jesus because the disciples having received the Holy Spirit quit hiding and went out into the world proclaiming what they had witnessed. We have recently talked about this discourse, about the actions of Jesus which modeled his expectations that they were to be different from the world. He again proclaimed that service to others was the goal. He gave them a new commandment—for them to love as he loved. He told them he was leaving them—going where they could not yet go—but promised that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit would come to them and remind them of what he had taught and lead them into all truth. That was a lot of information—and it was information which was confusing to them. He told them he knew that they had heard all they could bear but the Advocate would come and all would then be clear. The disciples had to not only be confused, but also anxious and fearful because their leader, the one they followed with such hope was leaving. So Jesus does one more thing for them—he prays for them. It is interesting that he not only prays for them, but also for us. Of course, the prayer is so complex and convoluted that we can sometimes forget that it is a prayer even though it is called the "high priestly prayer" of Jesus. In some ways because it is so theologically dense it sounds more like another commandment or teaching—this time about his relationship with the Father; or even more promises—assurances that one day they will be where Jesus is going and share his glory. There are many elements of this prayer, but at its core it is just that—a prayer. It's the

prayer of one person praying for others, others whom he loves. We have the experience of praying for others individually and corporately here in worship. Sometimes the prayers we offer up for others may not seem as powerful as those which are offered up for us. When someone prays for us individually in our presence, like Jesus did here for the disciples, when we are the recipients of the prayer—we are sometimes uncomfortable. Like the prayer of Jesus, it becomes intense—we may feel vulnerable, exposed, and not in control. But it can be powerful as well as it reminds us that we don't have to do it all, that there are others who are present to support us, that we are not alone but are valued and cared for by another. This is what Jesus has done here. And what does Jesus pray for? "That they may all be one." This concept of being one as presented by John involves a lot of being in one: Being one in the Father as the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father. When read in a certain way, this passage sounds like a call to uniformity—that's a type of being one. This passage is often used that way as a call for Christian unity—a prayer that all denominations might "be one". But when Jesus prayed this prayer—although he included those who believed because they had heard the message from another—there were no denominations present yet. There were just eleven guys from Galilee and Judea who've spent the last couple years together on a transforming spiritual journey—a road trip like no other. So at heart, this isn't exactly a prayer of institutional unity although it can be that. Much more, it's a plea to God that those whom Jesus loves and is about to leave, as well as those who will come later—us—might find relationships of oneness—love—or in more modern terms, "intimacy." If you look at this prayer you will find that the words calling for intimacy are repeated over and over. The word "love" is repeated no fewer than five times. In those same verses, Jesus speaks the word "one" four times. This gives voice to Jesus' longing that those whom he so loves might find their way to deep, trusting, intimate, loving human relationships. Jesus understands that such intimate relationships come at a cost—the cost of being vulnerable. This type of intimacy requires self-giving. What Jesus is asking for is the yielding of self out of unqualified love—willing vulnerability. Vulnerability and self-giving are in starkest contrast to the ethic of "quid pro quo" that besets our modern culture. We live in a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch your back" world. It's how business generally works, quite naturally, but then we often import the ethic of merest reciprocity into human relationships as well. The question that hangs over love and intimacy is always this: do people simply love others simply and only because they expect to get something in return? Sociologists will state quite emphatically that human nature is such that people really only care about themselves. What they do is always done to maximize their pleasure and minimize their pain. Some people do this in direct, even base ways, going straight for whatever immediately makes them feel good or gratifies their egos right then. Sociologists propose a concept called "enlightened self-interest" claiming that it is a benefit to enter into an intimate relationship because if you love people, they will love you back and make you feel good in return. In this model, everyone is still out for themselves. This is not the oneness which Jesus prays that we will receive. Jesus teaches that love, deep intimacy comes with a radical re-orientation away from self interest. It comes with voluntary vulnerability. It comes through the free and joyful giving of one's self to others. Jesus calls us to love for the sake of love, to love because God loves, even if loving is not exactly in our self-interest, even if there is no implied "reciprocity deal." Intimacy ushers us into the depths of what it is to be fully human. The truth is that self-giving love brings both

great joy and great anguish. Since today is also Mother's Day, I think that motherhood is a good example of this. This is a truth that every parent knows. In loving a child there is great joy and great pain. Tony was planning to visit me this week-end, and he did come up, but our time together was interrupted. A couple from his congregation requested that he officiate at the graveside of their son who overdosed on opium last week. They were originally from this area and wanted the burial to be among family. The joy felt at birth is beyond happiness, but the pain experienced through that relationship can also be great anguish. When you enter the danger zone of intimacy, you enter a land of joy that is higher and deeper than simple pleasure and pain. To love, to love a child, to love a parent, to love a man or a woman, even to love your neighbor, to love another as yourself, is to be pulled beyond the cold logic of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. We have two signals with our hands that are useful in describing our approach to intimacy. In the welcoming one, we open our hands palms up and wiggle our fingers in a signal universally understood to mean, "Come closer." The other one is also universally understood. We hold out our hand rigidly with the palm outward and the fingers rigid clearly declaring "Stop! Don't come closer!" That we have the two signals both understood across social, ethnic and culturally boundaries indicates how conflicted we are about inviting others into our space. We long for deep relationships, but at the same time we are afraid of them, afraid of what they will cost us. When Jesus prayed for the oneness of those who believed in him, he ended the prayer like this: "I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them." When we pray for ourselves and others, perhaps our most important prayer should be that we be one in love. That we always have our hands extended, palms up with fingers wiggling. Not that we be uniform, but that we love as God loves so that God may dwell within us. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.